

Wilmington's Democrats Organize

Simmons worked to control county Democratic committees' local campaigns as he directed by Wilmingtonians often chose their own course. In New Hanover County, Colonel Thomas W. Strange in April was selected to serve as chair of the local committee and worked closely with others developing facets of the white supremacy campaign in the city.¹ Although Simmons attempted to tightly control his county committees, Democrats in Wilmington used the statewide campaign to their benefit and modified components of Simmons' scheme to fit their needs. As a result, Simmons sought to rein in Wilmington's leaders for fear that they might make "some deal that they [the Democratic Party State Executive Committee] would not approve of." In response, local Democratic Party leader George Rountree informed Simmons that he might "go to H - - -, as we were going to run the campaign to suit ourselves down here."²

¹ George Rountree recalled that about twenty of the city's best businessmen were organized into a campaign committee to support Strange's activities. Additionally, Rountree was selected to join Frank Stedman, E.G. Parmele, and Col. Walker Taylor in running the campaign. Further, the campaign committee raised "a considerable amount of money" for the benefit of the campaign. George Rountree, "Memorandum of My Personal Recollection of the Election of 1898," n.d. Henry G. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

² Rountree was born in Kinston and was educated at Harvard. A successful attorney, Rountree lived and worked in New York and Richmond before returning to his native Kinston to operate law offices there. Rountree married Meta Davis of Wilmington in 1881 and the couple moved to the city in 1890. Some speculation regarding Rountree has surfaced that indicates he may have been brought into the fray as a strategic move by Democratic Party leaders. Particularly useful for Democrats, Rountree purportedly had first hand experience with white supremacy campaigns and disfranchisement movements in Georgia. Rountree, "Memorandum,"

Following the statewide example, other organizations such as the White Government Union and Red Shirts emerged in the city. Clandestine groups also began to script plans to assist in Democratic victory. All of the movements of the various groups were carefully managed by the local Democratic Party to orchestrate a tightly woven white supremacy, anti-Republican campaign.³

Essential to the rhetoric of the New Hanover white supremacy campaign was the statewide refrain of bad incumbent government. The Democrats also linked local Republicans to the sinking ship of Fusion. To accomplish this goal, local Democrats refused to cooperate with Populists who sought to create a Democratic-Populist fusion. The Democrats identified and discredited the actions, businesses, and character of leading Populists and Republicans.⁴ They targeted chiefly the "Big Four:" Mayor and physician Silas P. Wright, northern politician George Z. French, business leader William H. Chadbourn, and northern businessman Flavel W. Foster. They accused these men of rallying black voters behind candidates in order to achieve political victory at all costs. Democrats raised the specter of "negro domination" to mean not just a black voting majority in the city or black officeholding but the capability of blacks to dictate candidates and platforms because of their voting strength.⁵

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, s.v. "Rountree, George."

³ *Wilmington Messenger*, May 1, 1898.

⁴ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 537.

⁵ "Negro domination does not mean that the government in every part of the entire State is under control of negro influences—few negroes live in the western part of our State. When the great controlling element is the negro vote, and when that vote and its influences name the officials and dictate the policy of a town, city or county, then it is dominant. When it elects negro officials of a town or county, there is negro domination." Newspaper circular, [1900], Smithwick Papers, Private Collections, State